



...News

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Super Foods for a Super You in 2012

Everyone wants to know what the best foods are to eat for good health. These are often referred to as “Super Foods”. Super foods are nutrient rich, complete, whole foods that have been shown through research to significantly improve health and well being. When you see these lists from different sources, they will vary slightly, but all have the same underlying theme...vegetables, fruits, nuts/seeds, and lean protein sources. Nowhere on these lists will you find anything in a box, a can or any kind of pre-packaging. It is said that “the longer the shelf life of a food the shorter it will make your ‘shelf life’ (such as food in boxes and cans), and the foods that have a very short shelf life (such as fruits and vegetables) will give us a much longer ‘shelf life’”. Our body’s were meant to metabolize real foods not all the ingredients that come from a “box of food”. Now, of course, convenience foods can occasionally be worked into our diet- and believe me as a busy mom of three sometimes convenience foods are a necessary evil- but if the majority of the time you choose non pre-packaged food then you are doing you and your family a great “health service”.

Here are some definitions to be familiar with as you read this article.

Antioxidants reduce free radicals (oxidation) in our body which cause damage to the cells in our body.

Phytonutrients are compounds naturally found in plants that improve our health. They are often thought of as the “plant cancer fighters” but they also help to repair and maintain cellular health, boost our immune system, promote heart health, and reduce inflammation.

Fiber has many health benefits for our body which include digestive health, regularity, cardiovascular health, blood sugar regulation, and weight management. There are two types of fiber: soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber turns into a gel and acts like a sponge which helps to slow the rate of carbohydrate absorption. Insoluble fiber increases bulk in the intestine causing a “scrub brush” like action and, therefore, improving bowel health.

Protein is found in every cell in our body and helps to build, repair and maintain tissues.

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential fatty acids. The word essential means we have to get them from our food (our body cannot make them). Every cell in our body needs Omega-3’s to function properly, so receiving adequate Omega 3’s from our diet is imperative for healthy brain function (memory), improving mood, healthy immune function, cardiovascular health, cellular function, reducing inflammation, and metabolic health just to name a few!

And on to the Super Foods...

Blue-ribbon **Blueberries**

Blueberries out shine most other foods in their antioxidant and phytonutrient content particularly those that may help to prevent cancer, as well as memory and vision loss. Blueberries are also high in Vitamin C and potassium. The good news is that frozen blueberries retain their nutrient content, so we don't have to wait for them to be in season to enjoy them!

Colossal **Kiwi**

Kiwi is probably the most nutrient-dense fruit with more Vitamin C than an orange as well as a good source of potassium. A variety of phytonutrients pack this little fruit, probably giving it the ability to protect our cells from oxygen-related damage. Kiwi has been shown to be protective against asthma and macular degeneration, as well as act as a blood thinner to reduce blood clotting, therefore, improving cardiovascular health. Some health providers are now recommending 2 kiwi a day as an alternative to aspirin therapy due to the blood thinning ability of kiwi.

Big-league **Butternut Squash**

Butternut squash comes out ahead of sweet potatoes in several areas. Both are high in beta-carotene and Vitamin C, but butternut squash comes out ahead on calcium and Omega-3 content. Another bonus for butternut squash is that it is lower in calories and carbohydrate than sweet potato...so you could eat 2 cups of butternut squash or one cup of sweet potato for approximately the same calories and carbohydrate but you will be a lot more satisfied!

Keen **Kale**

Popeye would have to rethink his diet of spinach if he knew about Kale. While spinach is an incredibly healthy food and should be eaten on a regular basis, Kale comes out ahead with 45 different antioxidant phytonutrients (compared to about 12 in spinach). Kale is in the cruciferous vegetable category (along with broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage) and provides more Vitamin K than any other food. And as if Kale hasn't done enough already- it is an excellent source of Vitamins A and C, and contains the phytonutrients lutein and zeaxanthin which protect against age-related eye diseases. Kale has also been shown to have cholesterol-lowering abilities, supports our bodies' detoxification processes, and adds a decent source of Omega-3 fatty acids to our diet. And for a tip on cooking Kale...steam for five minutes for maximum nutrition benefits.

Big-time **Broccoli**

Much like it's relative in the cruciferous family we just discussed- Kale, broccoli also has cholesterol-lowering properties, supports our bodies' detox processes, and adds another source of plant-based Omega-3's to our diet. Broccoli is an excellent source of Vitamin C, Vitamin K, and folate, as well as a very good source of Vitamin A (beta-carotene), potassium, and Vitamin B6. Broccoli's uniquely high content of both Vitamins A and K can help the absorption of Vitamin D. And the high folate content further adds to broccoli's cardiovascular benefits. However, the grand finale for broccoli's health benefits are from a phytonutrient called Kaempferol. This particular phytonutrient has the ability to decrease chronic inflammation particularly in our digestive tract.

Champion Chia Seeds

These flavorless seeds are an excellent source of plant-based Omega-3 with approximately 3000 mg in two tablespoons. These little seeds will also do plenty to keep you regular due to their high fiber content. Chia seeds also have a unique gelling action when combined with liquid. It is this gelling action, along with a high fiber content, that allows for improved blood sugar control and high satiety value. Also, Chia seeds are a source of complete protein making it a particularly good food for vegetarians. Chia seeds outshine flaxseeds in three areas. First, is chia seeds high antioxidant content. It is chia seeds high antioxidant content that allows them to not go rancid like flaxseed (which is a major concern if consuming flaxseed). Second, chia seeds have a larger variety of phytonutrients which increases it's anti-inflammatory properties. Third, chia seeds contain more calcium and phosphorus, as well as boron which make chia seeds a good food to help increase bone density. Cha-cha-cha- chia!

Wow Ya Walnuts

Although all tree nuts provide health benefits, walnuts top the list due to their high content of Omega-3 fatty acids. Walnuts also have a few rare phytonutrients that are highly potent antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents. This may explain the decreased risk of certain cancers in relation to walnut consumption. Some other interesting research on walnuts are revealing that they may help regulate our sleep cycle due to the naturally occurring melatonin in walnuts. One note of caution, due to their high polyunsaturated fat content, walnuts can go rancid quickly. Be sure to check for freshness of your walnuts- avoid those that look rubbery or shriveled, and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator where they will keep for six months or the freezer for one year. When roasting walnuts, be careful to preserve the healthy oils by heating to no more than 170 degrees for 15-20 minutes.

Magnificent Mushrooms

Mushrooms are another food that are starting to be recognized for their vast array of health benefits. Believe it or not it is the crimini (common button-type mushrooms) that have greater nutrition benefits than other more exotic mushrooms. There are several key players that give mushrooms such a shining star of approval from the nutrition field. First, they contain selenium, zinc, and manganese which are important antioxidant nutrients. Second, mushrooms are a source of a special fatty acid called CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) which may play a role in preventing hormone-related cancers and asthma. Third, mushrooms have an unusual variety of phytonutrients that are difficult to obtain from other foods. Proper storing of mushrooms is essential to preserving their nutrient content. Store them in a refrigerator, take them out of the original packaging so they are in a single layer, and consume them before they become slimy or discolored. One last note- try to buy organic mushrooms whenever possible due to the growth medium of mushrooms.

Boasting Beans (and Lentils)

Beans are one of the richest food sources of saponins, a group of phytonutrients that have been shown to have a number of health benefits. These health benefits include lowering cholesterol, boosting our immune system, decreasing our risk of cancer, fighting bacterial and fungal infections, reducing inflammation, regulating blood sugar, as well as protecting against bone loss. Beans (as we all know!) are an excellent source of fiber which benefits our digestive system and further helps to regulate blood sugar. They are also a good source of potassium which may help to lower blood pressure. Try replacing beans or lentils for meat three or more meals per week and decrease your risk for heart disease dramatically. Edamame makes a delicious lentil appetizer!

Exceptional **Eggs (especially yolks!)**

Long gone are the days that we should avoid egg yolks. Egg yolks contains a nutrient called Choline. Ninety percent of Americans are deficient in Choline- I think partly due to our fear of egg yolks and how we heard for years that they will increase our cholesterol. Choline promotes cell membrane health, brain and memory development/ maintenance, and prevents build-up of homocysteine, thereby, preventing cardiovascular disease. A study found that people who had higher intakes of choline had lower levels of inflammation in their bodies'. Egg yolks also have lecithin which contains Arachidonic Acid (AA) and Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA). These long-chain polyunsaturated acids are important for membrane health as well as to develop and maintain our brain, nervous system, and visual health. Choline and lecithin are not the only beneficial nutrients in eggs. Eggs also contain large amounts of the phytonutrients lutein and zeaxanthin which prevent age-related macular degeneration and cataracts. Finally, eggs are a good source of low-cost high-quality protein.

Terrific **Tea**

Both black and green tea are loaded with antioxidants. However, green tea also contains the powerful antioxidant ECGC And since we are in the south, I have to mention that to get the maximum health benefit of drinking tea that it should be without sugar!

Divine **Dark Chocolate**

I had to have at least one "dessert" food on this list! Dark chocolate is packed with antioxidants and has been shown to lower blood pressure. You should purchase chocolate with 60% or higher cocoa content. The darker it is the lower the fat and sugar content. However, this does not give you the green light to eat an entire 1 pound bar of chocolate just because it is dark...one or two squares will provide your body with an adequate antioxidant load. So ask your sweetie for dark chocolate this Valentine's Day and it will be doubly beneficial for your heart!

All of these super foods help to reduce inflammation in our body which lowers chronic disease risk (such as heart disease, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, and asthma).

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